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Bonsai a living art form

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Body

When my review copy of *Fine Bonsai: Art & Nature* arrived, I was thrilled. Printed in a huge format with uncompromising attention to detail, this is the biggest book on my shelves. The simple, precise photos of little trees were taken by Dr.

Jonathan Singer, a former physician and a protégé of the Hasselblad corporation, known for its tremendously accurate cameras. For this book, he travelled to Japanese and American gardens that are havens for famous trees.

The photographer set each tree before a simple black background and then recorded 249 of the world's best examples in natural light. Mostly less than a metre tall, some are more than 500 years old. Many are printed life-size on gatefold pages, and their pots are also given respectful attention.

Except for a few short introductory essays by William Valavanis, founder of the International Bonsai Arboretum in Rochester, New York, no text mars the dramatic layout. At the back of the book, each tree is considered in a brief and surprisingly informative note. Here we learn the species of tree, its estimated age and poetic name. We learn whether it was collected or grown from seed, which practitioners have nurtured it over the years, and much else about the culture of bonsai. The trees were photographed in upstate New York, Pennsylvania, Seattle, Washington, D.C., and various locations in Japan.

After patiently examining this book, I found that the trees in my garden looked different, and gazing at the photographs made me long to see some real bonsai. So I arranged a visit to George Heffelfinger. His old car, parked at his garden off a country road in Saanich, has the vanity licence plate BONSAI and his business card noted he was past-president of the American Bonsai Society. "Call me George," he insisted.

Like a pet groomer, George was attending to a bushy-headed little ponderosa pine standing before him. He cocked his head to the right and pricked off a few pine needles, then pulled back and plucked an errant leaf or two. Beneath the arbutus and fir trees, his shelves of bonsai ran off into the distance. A few prize specimens were posing on their own tables.

Brushing gritty soil off the work table with his sleeve, George set down the splendid book. He confessed to more than 200 books in his bonsai library and called this one "exceptional." He knows the author and mentioned Valavanis's bias toward the traditional bonsai of Japan, where the art form originated.

I learned that here in the Pacific Northwest, a uniquely rugged expression of bonsai is also alive and well.

Bonsai a living art form

While we leafed through *Fine Bonsai*, George pointed out that this is an art form. These **trees are sculptures**, illusions, the product of constant and diligent effort. Nature, left to take its course, does not result in bonsai. It's this compulsion to create living sculpture that brings George out into the garden every afternoon.

An enormous part of his pleasure is to collect plant stock with interesting form. He and his pals might drive to the end of a logging road beyond Port Hardy, hike into a shallow swamp and there find twisted survivors - stumps buried in peat and bent low by wet snow. He also grows specimens from seed, propagates stems by grafting and air layering, and picks up likely plants among nursery discards. Each of his trees is named by variety and location of origin.

While we talk he is working - winding copper wire to shape each tiny branch, micro-pruning a tree to achieve a shape he has in mind, wedging the pot on an angle to promote a certain growth. This wonderful book has attuned me to the various bonsai formats - upright, cascading, trees in pairs, or mimicking a tiny forest. It drew my attention to the crusty bark, the exposed roots and the bleached deadwood that create the effect of age. Though the trees may actually be very old, it is artistry that makes them appear ancient. Over the years, many have passed through the hands of a number of artist-caretakers. Constant study of the growth of actual trees inspires the bonsai artist. As a landscape painter, I, too, study trees. Perhaps that is why this book has struck such a resonant chord with me. Looking through *Fine Bonsai* has been a pleasure and an inspiration, and it will be a valuable reference for years to come.

I encourage you to ask your favourite bookstore to bring in a copy for you.

Those who want to learn more about the art form should contact the Victoria Bonsai Society (victoriabonsaisociety.ca), which maintains a display in the Asian lounge at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. At the moment, the Horticultural Centre of the Pacific is building a new home for what will surely be a large collection of bonsai, scheduled to open next spring.

Fine Bonsai: Art & Nature, photographs by Jonathan M. Singer, text by William Valavanis, 400 pp., Abbeville Press, New York, \$150.

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Graphic

Handout; George Heffelfinger in his garden in Saanich, where he creates living sculpture.; *Fine Bonsai: Art &* This prize-winning sargent juniper, estimated to be 250 years old, is just 71 centimetres tall.; *Nature/;*

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